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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002216

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [ASEC](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES COURTESY CALL ON COTABATO CITY  
MAYOR

REF: A. MANILA 2198 (CHARGE DISCUSSES PEACE PROSPECTS  
TERRORISM WITH MILF LEADER)  
[1](#)B. MANILA 2055 (TWO U.S. SERVICEMEMBERS KILLED IN  
ROADSIDE EXPLOSION ON JOLO ISLAND)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4. (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Charge d'Affaires on October 16 paid a courtesy call on Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema, who welcomed the Charge on her first visit to the city. Sema expressed gratitude for U.S. development assistance and noted its tremendous impact on impoverished communities in central Mindanao, though he lamented the lack of support from the central government to speed the return of internally displaced persons to their home villages. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) under Sema's leadership supported the convergence of the government's two peace processes in Mindanao, but the Mayor noted the MNLF's difficulty in asserting itself and pursuing dialogue with the rural-based separatist Muslim group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Expressing concern about the deteriorating security situation in parts of Mindanao, Sema expressed condolences for the deaths last month of two U.S. servicemembers on the island of Jolo, and acknowledged that rogue MNLF elements had likely been involved. END SUMMARY.

GRATITUDE FOR U.S. DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE  
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[1](#)2. (C) In the Charge d'Affaires first visit to the office of Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema on October 16, the Mayor expressed appreciation for U.S. development assistance projects in and around his city, but also said he worried about flooding and the slow return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their villages. U.S. development assistance continued to have a positive impact on the region, the Mayor said, and he described how he had been particularly touched by projects that brought potable water and solar-power electricity to his home village. Despite the July ceasefire between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Sema said that IDPs remained reluctant to leave the security of IDP camps. Additional support services such as housing and livelihood programs could help encourage families to return to their villages, but assistance for conflict-affected communities from the government's Task Force on Health, Education, Livelihood, and Progress was too slow in coming. To address another challenge, major flooding, a massive rehabilitation program was needed to prevent heavy silting in one of the city's rivers.

SUPPORT FOR MNLF AND MILF PEACE PROCESSES  
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[1](#)3. (C) Sema expressed his support for the government's peace processes with separatist and insurgent groups in Mindanao,

though he was uncertain if the parties were serious enough to complete peace talks before the end of President Arroyo's term. He said he advised the GRP to fast-track implementation of the government's 1996 peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) so that MNLF factions would not be incited to violence. Moving forward, he continued, the best solution would be to harmonize peace and development initiatives of the MILF and MNLF peace processes "under one umbrella," though the Mayor acknowledged that differences between the MILF and MNLF still remained -- such as the fundamental difficulty of conducting dialogue with MILF "comrades who remained in the jungle." Still, Sema described the MNLF as being "sidelined" in the peace process, a consequence of having too few MNLF members with stature to assert themselves on peace process issues. Though Sema himself was involved in the peace process, he acknowledged the difficulties in handling the combined duties of Mayor and MNLF Chairman. The Charge said that the MNLF's ability to achieve the 1996 peace agreement with the government was proof that peace processes in Mindanao can work if the parties worked hard at it, which all sides should continue to do.

#### CONCERN ABOUT SECURITY SITUATION

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14. (C) Sema and the Charge both expressed concern about evidence of a deteriorating security situation in parts of Mindanao, starting with the Red Cross worker kidnappings on Jolo earlier this year, the deaths in September of two U.S. servicemembers on Jolo island (Ref B), and the recent kidnapping of Irish Catholic priest Michael Sinnott. Sema

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offered condolences for the U.S. servicemembers' deaths, which he blamed on the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and an MNLF faction led by Commander "Ajimoun." On top of the challenge of dealing with security concerns, Sema said he faced opposition from some in the Muslim community who labeled the MNLF as "traitors" to the Muslim cause because of the group's cooperation with the Philippine government. The Charge noted the U.S. would appreciate any support Sema could offer in the investigation of the deaths of the U.S. servicemembers and in the case of Sinnott's kidnapping. Noting the importance of public perception, the Charge thanked the Mayor for his support in helping Filipinos understand that U.S. servicemembers in Mindanao are contributing to humanitarian assistance and development projects.

#### COMMENT

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15. (C) Sema has been a consistent supporter of formalized peace processes to resolve the grievances of the MNLF and MILF. However, given his admission of feeling "sidelined," he may face mounting pressure from some in the Muslim community -- and his chief competitor, erstwhile MNLF leader Nur Misuari -- to push the government to do more to fulfill its commitments under the 1996 peace agreement. Contacts have reported that Misuari, who has retained the support of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, continues to portray himself as the real leader of the MNLF, and may be pursuing alliances with various dissatisfied groups throughout Mindanao, including indigenous groups in Bukidnon and a self-proclaimed Sultan of Sulu on the island of Jolo, to oppose a government peace deal with the MILF. Misuari's maneuvering could complicate Sema's hope for a combined peace settlement addressing both MNLF and MILF aspirations.

KENNEY